



Taking Delight in Words

Using Oral Language to Build Young Children's Vocabularies

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The following exchange occurred in a first-grade classroom in February:

Jason: Is this going to be an ordinary day?

Ms. H: What would make it ordinary?

Jason: If we like did the same old thing.

Ms. H: What might make it not ordinary, make it exceptional?

Jason: If you gave us prizes for being good—I mean exceptional and mature.

All of the children in this class of more than 20 students had been having difficulty learning to read, and many of them came from poverty backgrounds. In January, these children were brought together for most of the morning for intensive literacy instruction with a gifted teacher. The teacher had two major goals for the children: (1) They would learn to read; and (2) their listening and speaking vocabularies would be enlarged and enriched. By February, it was not unusual to hear the kind of conversation captured in the above example.

The purpose of this article is to explain some of the ways that prekindergarten through elementary school teachers can enhance the vocabulary development of young children. It focuses on teaching words from texts that are read aloud *to* children rather than read *by* children, and it presents activities that take into account the kind of support that young children need to make sense of those words.

We start by noting where words for young children's vocabulary development do *not* come from—and that is from the basal text materials that children are asked to read early in the course of reading acquisition. This is because, given beginning readers' word identification limitations, the text materials used in the early phases of learning to read should comprise words children know from oral language, that is, simple words like *run* and *ball*. As such, the early text materials are not good sources for adding new words to children's vocabulary repertoires. Emphatically, however, this does not mean that adding to and enriching children's vocabulary repertoires should be put on hold, it only means that enriching young children's vocabulary cannot be best developed through the words in the materials that young children read themselves.

Young children's listening and speaking competence is in advance of their reading and writing competence. That is, they can understand much more sophisticated content presented in oral language than they can read independently. As children are developing their reading and writing competence, we need to take advantage of their listening and speaking competencies to enhance their vocabulary development. We certainly must not hold back adding vocabulary to children's repertoires until their word recognition becomes adequate. Thus, a major source for identifying interesting words are the delightful trade books that are read to children, and we will turn to them in a moment.

But it's important to note that the ideas in the little stories young children read on their own can still be a useful resource. Though the *words* in the stories are not appropriate for enriching children's vocabularies, some of the *ideas* in the simplest stories can be characterized by sophisticated words. Thus, after a simple story has been read from a basal, the teacher can describe a character or incident with an interesting word. Consider for example, a story in a first-grade basal in which some children make cookies. The story is mostly built around pictures, with the vocabulary limited to some children's names and words such as *pass*, *pat*, *pan*, and *cookies*. The story ends with the children eating the cookies and saying, "Mmmm. Good!"

The teacher could remind the children that after the characters in the story ate the cookies they said, "Mmmm.

Good!" and explain that another way to say that is that the characters thought the cookies were *scrumptious*. She could explain the word further by saying that when something is scrumptious, it tastes great. *Scrumptious* lends itself to a variety of other interactions that children could have with the word. They could be asked to think of foods that they think are scrumptious, as well as suggesting foods that they do not think are scrumptious. The notion could go further with asking the children what would be scrumptious to a mouse? To a cat?

The teacher could also mention that in the story the children ate up all the cookies really quickly, explaining that another way to say that is that they *devoured* the cookies. The children could be asked to suggest foods that they would devour. Even further the teacher might suggest that the reason the children devoured the food is that they were *famished*. So, even though the stories that young readers read do not offer words to teach, the stories are still a resource for the teacher to use in generating target words for vocabulary development.

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As mentioned earlier, trade books that are read aloud to children are excellent sources of sophisticated words, and in recent work, we have been able to use them to advantage. Specifically, several years ago, we initiated Text Talk, a research and development project aimed at capturing the benefits of read-alouds. Text Talk has two main goals. One goal is to enhance comprehension through interspersed open questions that asked children to consider the ideas in the story, talk about them, and make connections among them as the story moves along. The second goal is to enhance vocabulary development, which is our focus in this article.

For Text Talk, we identified 80 children's trade books, and for each one, we selected about three words per story for direct teaching following the reading of the story. Several issues about the books and words need to be emphasized. First, although we think all the books are good children's books, there is nothing exclusive about the books we used. That is, there are many other books that could have been chosen. Second, although we selected an average of three words per book, we could have selected more. We considered issues of instructional time and the rate at which books were being read to children, which was one or two a week. As such, we thought that about three words per book was a reasonable number. However, there are many other approaches to determining the number of words taught. For example, if fewer books are read to children, more words from each book might well be identified for instruction.

And, though we only targeted three words per book for substantial vocabulary work, each of the books used has a wide and interesting vocabulary beyond these three words. Regular read-alouds from these books allow children to be generally and continually exposed to lovely and delightful words.

Sequenced Activities for Teaching Words to Young Children

In our Text Talk project, direct instruction in vocabulary occurs after a story has been read, discussed, and wrapped up. This provides a strong context with which to begin the word-meaning introduction. But note that in cases where we thought that a word was needed for story comprehension, we suggested that the teacher stop and briefly explain the word during reading.

Let's consider the vocabulary instruction for *A Pocket for Corduroy*, a story about a teddy bear (Corduroy) who spends the night at a laundromat. Our targeted words were *reluctant*, *drowsy*, and *desperately*.

As an example of the kinds of instructional suggestions provided to teachers, consider the following activities for *reluctant*:

Teacher: In the story, Lisa was *reluctant* to leave the laundromat without Corduroy. *Reluctant* means you are not sure you want to do something. Say the word with me.

Someone might be reluctant to eat a food that he or she never had before, or someone might be reluctant to ride a roller-coaster because it looks scary.

Tell about something you would be reluctant to do. Try to use *reluctant* when you tell about it. You could start by saying something like "I would be reluctant to _____."

What's the word we've been talking about?

Note how the instruction for *reluctant* was presented:

- First, the word was contextualized for its role in the story. (In the story, Lisa was *reluctant* to leave the laundromat without Corduroy.)

- The children were asked to repeat the word so that they could create a phonological representation of the word. (Say the word with me.)
- Next, the meaning of the word was explained using what we call "student-friendly" definitions—that is, a definition that characterizes the word and explains its meaning in everyday language. (*Reluctant* means you are not sure you want to do something.)
- Examples in contexts other than the one used in the story were provided. (Someone might be reluctant to eat a food that they never had before, or someone might be reluctant to ride a roller-coaster because it looks scary.)
- Children interacted with examples of the word's use or provided their own examples. (Tell about something you would be reluctant to do. Try to use *reluctant* when you tell about it. You could start by saying something like "I would be reluctant to _____.")
- Finally, children said the word again to reinforce its phonological representation. (What's the word we've been talking about?)

Vocabulary instruction in Text Talk always began with the context from the story because it provided a situation that was already familiar to children and provided a rich example of the word's use. However, it is important to move beyond this context in providing and eliciting examples of the word's use. This is not only because multiple contexts are needed for learners to construct a meaningful and memorable representation of the word. It is also important because young children have a very strong tendency to limit a word's use to the context in which it was initially presented.

Consider the following exchange, which took place when a class of kindergarten children were asked to talk about something they might be reluctant to do:

Child 1: I would be reluctant to leave my teddy bear in the laundromat.

Teacher: Well, that's just like what Lisa did in the story. Try to think about something you might be reluctant to do that is not like Lisa.

Child 2: I would be reluctant to leave my teddy bear in the supermarket.

Teacher: Okay, that's a little different than what Lisa was reluctant to do, but try to think of something that you would be reluctant to do that is very different than what Lisa was reluctant to do.

Child 3: I would be reluctant to leave my drums at my friend's house.

Teacher: That's pretty different from what Lisa was reluctant to do, but can we think of something that you would be reluctant to do that isn't about leaving something somewhere?

Child 3: I would be reluctant to change a baby's diaper!

Two of us were present when that exchange occurred, and we both agreed that because of the diaper example, most of the children in that class would remember the meaning of *reluctant* with ease!

Let's consider several of these component parts in more detail:

Student Friendly Definitions

Below we provide some examples of target words we chose from trade books and the kind of language we used to develop student-friendly definitions for young children:

- If something is *dazzling*, that means that it's so bright that you can hardly look at it. After lots of long, gloomy winter days, sunshine on a sunny day might seem dazzling.
- *Strange* describes something different from what you are used to seeing or hearing.
- *Exhausted* means feeling so tired that you can hardly move.
- When people are *amusing*, they are usually funny or they make you happy to watch them. A clown at a circus is amusing.
- When someone is a *nuisance*, he or she is bothering you.

Note that some of the definitions have an example embedded in them. For some words it is particularly hard to describe their meaning in general terms to young children given the limited vocabulary they have. That is, it can be hard to make new words clearly differentiated through words that are understandable to young children. Hence, folding an example into the definition can help to clarify and pinpoint the word's meaning.

Uses of the Word Beyond the Story Context

Besides sometimes folding examples into an initial definition, it is very important to provide examples of the word's use in contexts beyond its use in the story. Creating examples is not always easy. We get started by thinking about places young children are familiar with (e.g., school, home, park, street, playground); things they do (e.g., eat, sleep, play, go to school, watch TV); things they like and are interested in (e.g., animals, food, clothing, toys, books, nature). Consider the examples we developed for the words defined above:

- For *dazzling*: a big diamond ring; teeth after getting them cleaned at the dentist.
- For *strange*: a dog that meows; a fish that barks.
- For *exhausted*: how someone probably feels after running a long, long race, or after cleaning the house all day.
- For *amusing*: watching animals play at the zoo; seeing someone perform magic tricks.
- For *nuisance*: a baby brother or sister making a mess; someone who keeps interrupting you when you are talking.

Activities that Encourage Children To Interact With Words

The final activity for each word provides situations in which children have to interact with the target word, often by responding to and explaining examples as well as creating their own examples. As you review the activities below, notice the extent to which children will have to deal with the word's meaning in order to complete the task.

Questions, Reasons, and Examples

- If you are walking around a dark room, you need to do it *cautiously*. Why? What are some other things that need to be done cautiously?
- What is something you could do to *impress* your teacher? Why? What is something you could do that might *impress* your mother?
- Which of these things might be *extraordinary*? Why or why not?
 - A shirt that was comfortable, or a shirt that washed itself?
 - A flower that kept blooming all year, or a flower that bloomed for three days?
 - A person who has a library card, or a person who has read all the books in the library?

Making Choices

- If any of the things I say might be examples of people *clutching* something, say "clutching." If not, don't say anything.
 - Holding on tightly to a purse
 - Holding a fistful of money
 - Softly petting a cat's fur
 - Holding on to branches when climbing a tree
 - Blowing bubbles and trying to catch them
- If any of the things I say would make someone look *radiant*, say "You'd be radiant." If not, don't say anything.
 - Winning a million dollars
 - Getting a hug from a favorite movie star
 - Walking to the post office
 - Cleaning your room
 - Having the picture you painted hung up in the school library

Using All the Words

The lesson concludes with a short activity in which all the target words from the story are brought together. Each of these activities is initiated with a statement like, "We've talked about three words (words are specified). Let's think about them some more."

Relating Words

To develop a concluding activity; a good way to start is to see whether there is anything about the words that is related. In the case of *reluctant*, *insisted*, and *drowsy*, we noticed that each word might be expressed through facial expressions, so that is what was done. Sometimes more than one of the instructed words can be used in a sentence. For example, in the case of *prefer*, *ferocious*, and *budge*, we would develop the following question: Would you *prefer* to *budge* a sleeping lamb or a *ferocious* lion? Why? In the case of *pounce*, *sensible*, and *raucous*, we would ask children to choose between two words:

- If you get your clothes ready to wear to school before you go to sleep, would that be *sensible* or *raucous*?
- If you and your friends were watching a funny TV show together and began to laugh a lot, would you sound *pounce* or *raucous*?

One Context for All the Words

Often, it is difficult to find relationships among the target words. What can be done, though, is to use a single context. For example, notice how the words *immense*, *miserable*, and *leisurely* are used in the questions below:

- What would an *immense* plate of spaghetti look like?
- Why might you feel *miserable* after eating all that spaghetti?
- What would it look like to eat spaghetti in a *leisurely* way?

Same Format

One can bring some coherence to an activity by using the same format for all three words. Several examples follow:

- If a dog was acting *menacing*, would you want to pet it or move away? Why?
- If you wanted to see something *exquisite*, would you go to a museum or a grocery store? Why?
- Is *snarl* something a fish might do or a lion might do? Why?

Children Create Examples

In the last example above, the format asked the child to make a choice and to explain the choice. The explanation is the most important part, because it requires the child to explicitly think through how the word fits the choices in the questions in order to express the relationship between the example and the word. Another format we used to prompt children's thinking of how a word fits a context was to have them create examples such as these:

- If there were an *emergency* at an amusement park, what might have happened?
- If you had a friend who watched TV all the time, how might you *coax* him into getting some exercise?

The "Using All the Words" activities we created to conclude a Text Talk lesson were both a way to get another encounter with each word and a way to bring all the words together to begin the process of having them become a natural part of the children's language rather than isolated, specialized items.

Maintaining Words

The vocabulary research strongly points to the need for frequent encounters with new words if they are to become a permanent part of an individual's vocabulary repertoire. In Text Talk, target words were placed on a bulletin board next to the cover of the story from which they came. Tally marks were placed next to words when they were mentioned by the teacher or children. In this way, a class's "favorite words" were identified. There are many variations of this notion, as well as other ways to keep children thinking about and using target words. Here are some that we observed in Text Talk classrooms.

Applying Previously Learned Words to New Stories

Both teachers and children often noticed when words they had learned appeared in subsequent stories that were read. But we also noticed occasions when a learned word did not necessarily appear in a story but could be applied. In these cases, teachers challenged children to apply vocabulary words from past stories to the one being read. An example of this situation occurred during a reading of *Curious George Goes to a Chocolate Factory* (Rey & Rey, 1998). In that story, George, the curious monkey, loves chocolate and nearly causes disruption in a chocolate factory by trying to find his favorite candy. But he ends up helping in an unintended way, and he is rewarded with a free box of chocolates for his efforts. The teacher asked the following questions that relate words learned from previous stories to the Curious George story:

- We learned some words in other stories that could fit here, too. How about the word *craving*? How does that describe something that happened in this story?
- Remember the word *deserve*? George got a box of chocolates as a present at the end. Do you think that he deserved to get that? Why?
- Does anybody remember a word that George might use to talk about the candy? It's a word we used to talk about the things the wolf baked for the children in *The Wolf's Chicken Stew* (Kasza, 1987). He thought the candy was _____ [*scrumptious*].

Using Words in Reading and Writing Situations

Teachers developed a number of different ways to use the words children were learning in various reading and

writing situations, including the following:

- Incorporating the words in the daily message. For example: Today is Tuesday. It is a *lovely* day outside. The sun is *radiant*. I *insist* that we work hard this morning so we can all go outside at recess.
- Creating a dictionary with word meanings and sample sentences.
- Encouraging children to use the words in their writing.
- Writing words on slips of paper and placing them into a container and when there is some downtime in the day, such as just before lunch, challenging children to create sentences with that word.

* * *

People who have large vocabularies tend to be intrigued with words. As such, a major impetus for our work is our concern that school vocabulary instruction tends to be dull, rather than of the sort that might instigate students' interest and awareness of words. Becoming interested and aware of words is not a likely outcome from the way instruction is typically handled, which is to have students look up definitions in a dictionary or glossary. Indeed, asking students to look up words in the dictionary and use them in a sentence is a stereotypical example of what students find uninteresting in school.

Less than interesting instruction is not a problem merely because we want students to enjoy classroom activities. Rather, students need to develop an interest and awareness in words beyond school assignments in order to adequately build their vocabulary repertoires. Part of what needs to occur is that students need to keep using words if they are to "own" new words. Students need to notice words in their environments whose meanings they do not know. They need to become aware of and explore relationships among words in order to refine and fully develop word meanings. Indeed, being curious about the meaning of an unknown word that one encounters and about how it relates to other words is a hallmark of those who develop large vocabularies.

Development of these facets of word learning cannot just rely on students spontaneously engaging with words on their own, as it simply will not occur in many cases. Rather, these facets must be the direct focus of instructional conditions. It has been our experience that students become interested and enthusiastic about words when instruction is rich and lively, and that conditions can be arranged that encourage them to notice words in environments beyond school.

We hope that the strategies and activities described above can help teachers bring delightful vocabulary instruction and a thorough delight in words to the children they teach.

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